

## **Gender and Sexuality and the Images of Women in Early Buddhism**

*(Study based on three sources: the Vinaya, the Jātakas and the Therīgāthā)*

by

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### **Abstract**

*Issues of sexuality and gender are very crucial in understanding the images of women in Buddhism. Another way of regarding this question is that even though the concept of male-female binary is set at birth, this is only true of a particular birth. The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth asserts that gender can be changed over successive transmigrations. Thus in the philosophical sense there is no male or female, but only a single karmic stream. This is hardly surprising given that the anatta doctrine (temporality and non-permanence) of Buddhism ensures that there is not even a personal identity over the Samsaric stream. This is another reason why Dhamma for most part ignores the sexual identity of persons.*

*Therefore, in this article I attempt to show that being born a woman is 'not' the result of bad karmas (deeds and actions) in the popular traditions of India when the Buddhist scholars wrote down the Jātakas. The three important texts, i.e. the Therīgāthā, (songs of the women who embraced Buddhism not by force but through their own understanding of the Buddhist path to salvation i.e. nibbana), the Jātakas (folk stories) and the Vinaya Pitaka (the didactic text) attest the fact that women were*

*an important agent and the authors of these texts were very sympathetic towards them when placed in contradiction with other categories of people mentioned in these texts.*

**Keywords: Jātakas, Therīgāthā, Vinaya, Buddhist Women, Sexuality, Gender, Paṇḍaka, Hermaphrodites.**

## **Introduction**

A lot of scholarly works done on the topic of Buddhism's stand on women in Indian literature shows that on one hand scholars opine that Buddhism gave no importance to the women's role in the religious life<sup>1</sup>, on the other hand some scholars think that Buddhism stood as a revolutionary step in bringing women to the equal footing of men in realizing their spiritual quest.<sup>2</sup> Central to this question of position of women in Buddhism is the issue of sexuality and gender. How Buddhism perceived the role of gender and sexuality is thus the main theme of my study.

It is said that the Buddhists emphasized the importance of the agency of Karma (actions/deeds in previous births) in the case of sex change over successive births. They believed that unwholesome Karmic conditions lead the male to turn into a female, and the wholesome conditions do the opposite.<sup>3</sup> Hence there is an underlying assumption on gender inequality.

Buddhism gave a lot of importance to the proper sexual behavior, which can be clearly seen from the three major texts i.e. the Jātakas, the Therīgāthā and the Vinaya Pitaka. While linking sex change to causality (primarily sexual behavior), early Buddhist sources express a certain contradiction regarding gender equality. Although, Buddha on several occasions explicitly expressed gender equality in the way that both monks and nuns can attain full enlightenment or *Arhantship*, (Cullavagga declares that women are capable of attaining Arhantship) the early *Sangha* (Buddhist monastery) soon adhered to a mainstream institutionalized misogyny leaving nuns in second place in the hierarchy of the sentient beings on the Buddhist path towards spiritual transformation. As a result of this, a female always has to be reborn as male before realizing *Arhantship* (The highest goal of Buddhist path of salvation).

While dealing with the question of sexuality in the pursuit of salvation for the Buddhists, scholars often ignore the presence of the third category of people (I termed them as 'others' for the purpose of easy understanding of the early Buddhist perception regarding gender) called by primarily two names in the text, i.e., *Ubhatavyanjanaka*,<sup>4</sup> the hermaphrodite (those who were both male and female) and the *Pandaka* <sup>5</sup> (those who were neither male nor female).<sup>6</sup> Thus there is a problem in believing that gender had no role to play in the attainment of salvation.

The mentioning of the hermaphrodite and the *pandaka* clearly shows that gender did play a crucial role in deciding whether a person is fit or unfit in the Buddhist world for attaining salvation. According to the *Vinaya* rules, these people were totally excluded from ordination.<sup>7</sup> The story in the *Vinaya* about the prohibition of the ordination of these section of people is in the response to the example of a Buddhist monk with an

insatiable desire to be sexually penetrated by men, who requested and received this from some animal handlers, who then in turn related the incident to the wider community and humiliation upon the Sangha.<sup>8</sup> Thus there is a need to place the question of sexuality in a proper context of Buddhist understanding of one's sex which decides whether or not a person is fit for realizing salvation.

### **Selection of the Sources**

The Vinaya Pitaka, the first division of the Tipitaka is the textual framework upon which the monastic community (*Sangha*) is built. It includes not only the rules governing the life of every *Bhikkhu* (monk) and the *Bhikkhuni* (nun). It is also a host of procedures and conventions of etiquette that support harmonious relations, both among the monastics themselves, and between the monastics and their lay supporters, upon whom the Sangha depended for all their material needs.

On the other hand the Jātakas which are considered as the folktales, enormous numbers of old folk tales and fables which were adopted into the canons of the Buddhist schools, tales which were retold as though they were about the many, many previous existences of Buddha. These stories were early oral compositions, composed by common men in the common dialect called Pāli. These tales were a reflection of the social sentiments of the general masses and also a projection of the official Buddhist position on the subject of women. The subject of the narratives incorporated incidents and anecdotes from the contemporary, localized social milieu.<sup>9</sup> It was because of their mass appeal, and flexible narrative structure, that in due course they came to be incorporated as a part of

Buddhist literature. These tales provide direct or indirect insight into the perceived women as mother, daughter, courtesans etc.

The Therigāthā is the verses or the poems of the Elder Nuns. It is a short but very significant document in the study of early Buddhism as it is the earliest known collection of women's literature. It consists of 73 poems organized into 16 chapters. The text contains passages, which reaffirm the view that women are the equal competitors of men in terms of spiritual attainment.

All the above-mentioned sources belonged to different genres and discuss women and the 'others' in different contexts and capacities. The fundamental differences in the composition of the texts are pointed out by bringing the differences in the three texts crucial to the understanding of the role of gender in Buddhism. While Therigāthā as stated above, a composition about women, composed by the women. It articulates many personal and spiritual experiences of the women. It also talks about the assessment of their past life and so on, while the Vinaya and the *Jātakas* have been composed by male authors and therefore embody an essentially male perspective. On the other hand the *Cullavagga* (Vinaya Pitaka) offered the official, doctrinal position on the subject of women and the others in the Buddhist Sangha. Its textual content was normative and authoritative in character. Thus one can assume that a common dominant undercurrent of mistrust and negativity runs through most of the Buddhist texts with regard to women but women did enter the Sangha and became an important part of Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

This paper is divided into two parts, which are further divided into various sub-sections. The first part is entitled 'Stories of Women and the 'Others' deals with the stories (I treat them as case studies) of **(a)** women's images (thirteen stories), **(b)** stories of the third

sex two stories) and **(c)** stories of women's spirituality (eight stories) in contrast with the 'others'. The second part entitled 'Buddhism: Ideas of Sexuality and the role of Gender' deals with the role and importance of gender and sexuality in the attainment of the highest goals in Buddhist texts and is further divided into sub-sections i.e. **(a)** Concept of Sexuality and the role of Gender and **(b)** Understanding of women of Buddhism and vice-versa followed by the conclusion.

### **Part One: Stories of Women and the 'Others'**

Thus there were four sections of people mentioned in the earliest monastic texts i.e. men, women, the *Ubhatavyanjanaka* and the *Pandaka*. Sexual behavior constituted a major part of Buddhist teachings. The five precepts (*panca-sila*)<sup>11</sup> for the Buddhist laity (both men and women) also affirm the point. These precepts included abstinence from harmful living, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication. The 'others' here are mentioned only occasionally, but their presence is important. There are many stories and incidences about the image of a particular gender. Therefore I have divided the stories for the proper understanding into different categories. These categories of stories tell us a wide range of images prevalent in the contemporary society. These stories tell us how Buddhism dealt with these images and the different positions given to the women.

#### **(a) The Stories of the Women's Images.**

1. The story (Ananusociya Jātaka, story number 328)<sup>12</sup> recounts that there was a holy man passing from the Brahma world and was born again in the form of a young girl in a Brahmin family named *Sammillabhasini*, endowed with all the features of female

beauty. She was 'perfectly pure' (in the Buddhist sense related to sexual desire which was considered to be a hindrance in the way of attaining salvation) as there was no thought of passion existed in her character. She was married to a man against her wishes. Though sharing the same room and the same bed, they did not regard one another as husband and wife (without seeing each other with sinful passion), but dwelt together like 'two holy men or two holy female saints'.

This story is very important as it clearly shows the popular belief in sex change over successive birth (to be discussed in the next part). Also the choices of women received importance by the writers of the texts.

**2.** The *Suruci Jataka* (story no. 489), tells us that once a king asked his wife that, 'what is the worst misery for a woman?' She replied, 'to quarrel with her fellow wives.'<sup>13</sup> The king then decided that to save his only daughter from this misery, he would give her only to that person who would have her as his only wife.

**3.** In the *Therigatha* (songs of the Buddhist women or the women who embraced Buddhism), Kisa Gotami's experience as a woman can be taken as a proof to say that being a woman posed a lot of problem to lead a good life in society. The verses are as follows:

Woeful is women's lot...

Woeful when sharing home with hostile wives,

Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain,

Some seeking death or else they suffer twice.

Piercing the throat; the delicate poison take.

Woe too when mother-murdering embryo

Comes not to birth, and both alike find death.<sup>14</sup>

4. The story of *Phusati* (Vessantara Jātaka, story number. 547) tells us instead of asking for being born as a man, women often craved for becoming mother of a son or wife of Buddha. The story goes that Sakka, the king of gods once asked a woman named Phusati to ask for ten boons that he would grant her. She thus asked for the following things:

...Craving that my life in Sivi's realm may be

Black eyes, black pupils like fawn, black eyebrows may I have...,

A son be mine, revered by kings, famed glorious, debonair,

Bounteous, ungrudging, one to lend a ready ear to prayer,

And while the babe is in my womb let not my figure go,

Let it be slim and graceful like a finely fashioned bow...

God bless king Sivi! Come to meat! Be I his queen avowed.<sup>15</sup>

5. The *Tesakuna* Jātaka (Story number 521) tells us that once upon a time, there was a king who had no son or daughter. Therefore he adopted a male owl, a female maynah (a bird), and a male parrot. He said to his officials that they should be treated as his children. On all these children, the king bestowed much wealth without making any distinction due to their dissimilar sexes. But as a result of the king's adopting the birds



as his children, the courtiers made fun of him amongst them, saying, 'look at what the king does; he goes about speaking of birds as his son and daughter.'<sup>16</sup> Then the king thought of showing the wisdom of his children in front of those people. He not just tested his sons but he also tried to prove the wisdom of his daughter. He questioned her about the duties of the king. She (the female maynah) thus replied, 'I supposed, sir, you are putting me to test, thinking what will a woman be able to tell you? So I will tell you, putting all your duties as a king into two maxims.'<sup>17</sup> Thus she answered the king about the duties in as many as eleven stanzas. The king was delighted and granted her the post of treasurer. Thenceforth she held the office and acted for the king.

**6.** The SuruciJataka (story number 489) is a very interesting tale that is about a lay supporter named Vishaka and how she received eight boons from the Buddha. It is said that when she received the eight boons the brethren talked to each other saying that notwithstanding her womanhood, she received eight boons from Buddha. 'Ah, great are her virtues!'<sup>18</sup> Thus proving the value of a woman for the Buddhists.

**7.** The Sama Jataka, one of the most important stories dealing about the images of women tells us that a king named Piliyakkha, who ruled in Benares, in his great desire for venison had entrusted the kingdom to his mother.<sup>19</sup> The same story also states that women had a lot of space and respect. The instance of a woman named Parika clearly proves that. When her parents insisted her to get married she refused as she had come from the Brahma world and wanted to renounce the world.<sup>20</sup>

**8.** The Sambhula Jataka (story no. 519) talks about the distrust and contradiction towards the women. It shows that often women did not remained quite and questioned their husbands who distrusted her. The story tells us that a woman named Sambhula,

whose husband Sothisena was the son of a king named Brahmadata. Sothisena once said to Sambhula, 'Well lady, it may be so. With womankind it is hard to discover the truth'.<sup>21</sup> Then the queen said that, 'my lord, though you do not believe me, by virtue of the truth, I speak, I will heal you.'<sup>22</sup> Then she performed an act of truth, and no sooner was the water sprinkled over Sothisena, the leprosy straightway left him. In this way the truth in the wife proved important in curing the husband. The queen did not remain quite but by performing the ritual, she proved her husband wrong.

**9.** In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, It was mentioned that an ordained monk went away alone one day and he met his former wife on the way. She spoke to him thus, 'what, have you now gone forth?' He replied, 'yes, I have gone forth.' Then she said to him, 'sexual intercourse is difficult for those who have gone forth. Come and indulge in sexual intercourse.'<sup>23</sup> He thus indulged in it and as a result of that, he went the monastery (*Vihara*) late. This story is a typical example of distrust and popular notion about women who was seen as the biggest threat in maintaining chastity of the Buddhist monks.

**10.** The *Canda Kinnara Jataka* (story number 485) is about Rahula's (Buddha's son) mother. The story narrates that one day when the Buddha went to visit her, i.e., Rahula's mother in her palace, she welcomed him despite of her grief and sorrows. Then about her, the king (Buddha's father) told Buddha that 'she heard you wore yellow robes, and so she robed herself in yellow... Sits upon the ground. When you entered upon the religious life she became a widow; and refused the gifts that other kings sent her. So faithful is her heart to you.'<sup>24</sup> Then Buddha replied, 'it is no marvel, great king! That now in my last existence the lady should be of faithful heart and led by me alone. So, also, even when born as an animal, she was faithful and mine alone'.<sup>25</sup>

11. The *Vessantara Jātaka* (story number 547), talks about the conversation between woman named Maddi and her father-in-law who was trying to stop her when his son and her husband was renouncing the world to join the Buddhists. Therefore when king tries to convince her but she replied:

As for these things so terrible, which you have tried to show, I willingly accept them all, I am resolved to go...

Knocked down and smothered in the dust, and haled roughly by the hair a man may do them any hurt, all simply stand and stare.

O terrible is widowhood! ...

Men pull about the widow's sons with cruel blows and foul,

O terrible is widowhood...

A widow may have brothers ten, yet is a naked thing.

O terrible...

The wife who shares her husband's lot..... ,

Her fame the very gods do praise, in trouble she sure. <sup>26</sup>

12. The *Ananusociya Jātaka* (story number 328) is about a landowner who had lost his wife. On her death, he neither washed himself nor took food, and neglected all his duties. As a result of his anguish he would wander about the cemetery lamenting, while his 'predestination to enter the first path blazed forth like a halo about his head.'<sup>27</sup> The Buddha asked him the reasons for his grieve. When he told him the reason, the Buddha

replied, 'Lay brother, that which is breakable is broken, but when this happens, one ought not to grieve. Sages of old, when they lost a wife, knew this truth, and therefore sorrowed not.'<sup>28</sup> This story tells us the importance of woman as a wife and her value in the household.

13. In the *Mahavaggasection* of the Vinaya, there is an incidence about a courtesan named Ambapalika (Amrapali) who lived in a city named Vaisali. 'She was beautiful, graceful, pleasant, gifted with the highest beauty of complexion, well versed in dancing, singing, lute playing, and many other arts'. She was much visited by 'desirous people'. Vaisali was a prosperous city and an important center of commercial activities, presently situated in Bihar. It was said that Ambapalika generally charged fifty *Kahapanas*<sup>29</sup> for one night, for her customer. Because of Ambapali, Vaisali became more and more flourishing. When a merchant from Rajagriha (another famous city of ancient India) saw the prosperity of Vaisali because of Ambapalika, he also asked the king (of Rajagriha) to install a courtesan in their city.<sup>30</sup>

In that same text there was at Rajagaha a girl Salavati by name who was appointed by the merchant as courtesan of Rajagaha. And when the courtesan became well versed in arts like dancing, singing etc., and was much visited by desirous people, she became pregnant. She then thought, 'Men do not like a pregnant woman. If anybody would find out regarding me that the courtesan Salavati is pregnant, my whole position will be lost. What if I were to have the people told that I am sick.'<sup>31</sup> After a few days when the child in her womb had reached maturity, she gave birth to a baby boy. She gave orders to her maidservant to put her child into an old winnowing basket and throw him away.

**b. Stories of the 'Others' (*Pandaka/Hermaphrodites*).**

Apart from man and woman, the other two categories of people mentioned in the texts occurred very rarely but these stories help one to understand the position of the other sex in early Buddhism. I found three stories important to know the place ascribed to them in the early Buddhist texts.

**1.** The story of Ruja (*Mahānārada-kassapa Jātaka*, story number. 544) is relevant for all the three sub-sections in this part. She was a princess and practiced Buddhism independently of her father. She once told her father about her previous seven births and the seven future births. She said,

My seventh former birth ... was as the son... I had an evil companion and I committed much evil; we went about counting other's men's wives as if we had been immortal. Those actions remained laid up like fire covered with ashes...! Followed a friend who was devoted to good works ... and he grounded me in what was good ... And that action remained buried like a treasure in water. But the fruit of evil deeds which I had done in Magadha came round to me at last like a noxious poison... After that I was born in the womb of a monkey... I was next born, as an ox ... this was the fatal consequence of my going after other men's wives. When I passed from that birth I was born in family among the Vajji people, but was neither man nor woman, for it is a very hard thing to attain the being born as a man, this was the fatal consequence... Next, o king, I was born... as a nymph ... an attendant in Sakka' s court. While I stayed there I remembered all these births and also the seven future births which I shall experience... The good which I did ... has come

round in its turn, and when I pass from this birth I shall be born only among gods or men. For seven births...I shall be honoured ... but till the sixth is past I shall not be free from my female sex....<sup>32</sup>

2. The story of Isidasi was discussed in the *therigātha*. She writes about herself, she wrote that she was susceptible to sex attraction, created adulterous conduct. For this she was in purgatory for many centuries, and thereafter for three rebirths was an animal. Thereafter a slave woman as a hermaphrodite brought her up.<sup>33</sup> The following lines tells about her experience

I came to birth, child of a household slave,

Neither of woman nor of man's my sex,

Such was the fruit of my lasciviousness.<sup>34</sup>

3. Related to the ordination of the sexually non-conformists (the others'), both male and female, there are special section in the Vinaya for the monks and the nuns. The rule of non-allowance of the *pandaka* and the *Ubhatavyanjanaka* was in response to these incidences. For example the Mahavagga tells us,

At that time a certain *pandaka* was ordained among the monks. He approached a number of young monks and said, 'Come, Venerable Ones, defile me.' The monks reproached him: 'Be gone *Pandaka*, away with you! What have we to do with that?' After that the *pandaka* tried to approach the novices, then he approached the elephant keepers and the grooms respectively. But the elephant became angry and irritated. He

said, 'these recluses, these followers of the Buddha are paṇḍaka and those who are not paṇḍaka defile paṇḍaka. Thus do they all lack discipline.' The monks told this matter to Buddha. The Buddha replied that 'Monks. If a Paṇḍaka is not ordained, let him not be ordained. If he is already ordained let him be expelled.'<sup>35</sup>

**c. The stories related to the spirituality of women.**

1. The story of princess Ruja in the Jātakas (Mahānārada-kassapa Jātika, story number. 544; mentioned above) is also interesting. In this story she tries to convince his father about the Buddhist path of righteousness, which leads to salvation. While giving discourse to her father she talks about the sorrows, which she had undergone in her past births.

In the same story Ruja told her father that those who desire to rise persistently from birth to birth, he should avoid another's wife. And thus he will follow his own highest good, be he born as a woman or man.

2. The Guna Jātika (story number. 157), tells us that how the elder Ānanda received a present of robes worth of thousand pieces of money from the queens. It was said that these robes were given in gift to the husband of these royal ladies, whom he gave to many of his wives, but these women did not accept them, rather they gave these robes to Ānanda, who used to give religious discourses to these queens. When the king came to know about this incidence, he rebuked Ānanda and asked him, "do my ladies learn or listen to your preaching?" Ānanda replied, "Yes, they learn what they ought to, and what they ought to hear, they hear."<sup>36</sup>

3. The Tipallattha Jātaka (story number 16) tells us that when the Buddha was staying at Aggalava temple, female lay-disciples and sisters used to flock thither to hear the truth preached. Thus it can be said that the women actively participated in Buddhism.

4. In the *Therigatha*, the incidence of a woman named Khema says that Mara, in youthful shape tried to tempt her.<sup>37</sup> He told Khema,

Thou are fair, and life is young, beautiful Khema!

I am young, even I too-...

Seek we pleasure.

She replied, in a true renouncer's way:

Through this body vile, seat of disease and corruption Loathing I feel,  
and oppression. Cravings of lust are uprooted.

Lusts of the body and sense mind cut like daggers and javelins. Speak  
not to me of delighting in aught of sensuous pleasure!<sup>38</sup>

4. Addhakasi's story is cited in the *Therigatha*<sup>39</sup> and it was said that one day, in one of her former births, she insulted an *Arahant* elder sister (senior Buddhist nun) by calling her a prostitute, and for this she went to purgatory. In this Buddha dispensation she was reborn in the kingdom of Kasi as the child of a distinguished and prosperous citizen. However, due to the persistent effect of her former evil speech, she turned into a prostitute.<sup>40</sup> What led her to become a *Bhikkhuni* is not mentioned.



5. Ambapali (Amrapali), in her former births, was walking in a procession with the *Bhikkhunis*, to pay homage at a shrine. At that holy shrine, when an *Arahanththeri* in front of her hastily spat in the court of the shrine, she said in reproof: 'what prostitute has been spitting in this place?'<sup>41</sup> And because of this karma, she became a courtesan, in Vaisali as has been already mentioned above.

6. This story is about the relation between the spirituality of women and their images in the society. The statement given by the lady patron Visakha occurred in the Mahavagga, where she asked for the eight boons from the Buddha proves this. When Buddha asked her the reasons behind asking for each of the boons she told him that because the *Bhikkhunis* were in the habit of taking bath in the river *akiravati* with the courtesans at the same landing place and they are naked, the courtesans took this opportunity to ridicule the *Bhikkhunis*. The courtesans used to tease the Buddhist nuns saying, 'what is the point of maintaining chastity when you are young? Are not the passions the things to be indulged in? When you are old, maintain chastity then; thus will you be obtainers of both ends.'

Thus Visakha complained about this incident to Buddha. She said:

"Then the *Bhikkhunis*, lord, when thus ridiculed by the courtesans, were confused. Impure, lord, is nakedness for a woman, disgusting, and revolting. It was this circumstance, lord, that I had in view in desiring to provide the *Bhikkhuni's* Sangha with dresses to bathe in for lifelong."<sup>42</sup>

7. In the *Cullavagga*,<sup>43</sup> there is a story of a *Bhikkhuni*. The story tells us that the nun who had followed Buddhism for the last seven years was very forgetful. She lost it as fast

as she received it. She told herself, 'for seven years I have followed the Blessed one, learning the Vinaya; and, being forgetful, I have lost it as soon as I received it. Hard it is for a woman to follow the blessed one her life long.' When the Buddha came to know about this problem he allowed the *Bikkhus* to teach the Vinaya to her.

8. In the Mahavagga (Vinaya Pitaka), there is an incidence of the nuns (Bhikkhunis) who were once travelling on the road from the city named Saketa to Savatthi. On the way robbers broke forth, robbed some of the nuns, and violated others. When lord Buddha came to know about it he said, 'If a person, O Bhikkhus, who has violated a Bhikkhuni (or has had sexual intercourse with a Bhikkhuni), if that person has not received the *Upasampada* ordination, let him not receive it; if he has received it, let him be expelled (from the fraternity).'<sup>44</sup> This incident clearly shows that Buddha himself respected the women and the place of women in the Buddhist spirituality.

### **Part Two: Buddhism: Ideas of Sexuality and the role of Gender**

In this section, I have tried to explain the above-mentioned stories in the proper historical context. The contradictory nature of the Buddhist approach is depicted right from the early Buddhist texts. The Cullavagga/Kullavagga section of the Vinaya shows that how difficult it was for Ananda to convince Buddha to let the women enter the Buddhist monastic order, i.e., Sangha.<sup>45</sup> Lord Buddha is said to have grudgingly allowed women as an institutionalized category within monastic Buddhism. On doing so he is believed to have said,

If not Ananda, women would not have received permission to go out from the household life and enter the homeless states, under the

doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgatha, then would the pure religion, Ānanda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But, since Ānanda women have now received that permission the pure religion Ānanda, will now last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years.<sup>46</sup>

This statement of Buddha has substantiated the contention of those who wish to see the Buddhist teachings as misogynists. Those, who claim that early Indian Buddhism should be evaluated as a sect against women, often perceive the texts as projecting the women as temptresses and seducers of men. But in spite of the generally accepted belief that the admittance of women as nuns into the Buddhist monastic order was restricted, there were many women who eventually came to be associated with Buddhism. In fact meeting women was not unwanted; in fact many women visited Buddha very often. In this background this section is sub-divided into two parts, i.e., (a) the concept of sexuality and the role of Gender, and (b) the understanding of women of Buddhism and the vice-versa.

**(a) The concept of sexuality and the role of Gender.**

Thus in the first section we see different approaches by the writers of the Buddhist texts on the question of comparing women and men and women with 'others' in the Buddhist texts. If we compare Vinaya and Jātakas, we see that on one hand this category of people (called pandaka etc.) were considered as impure and were not ordained. They were not even allowed to give gifts. On other hand, Jātakas tells us that being born a hermaphrodite is a result of one's bad karma in the past births. Therefore, we can infer that Buddhists did have something to do with the question of one's gender in making the

pursuit of the path easy or difficult (as in the case of Ruja and Isidasi). They were differentiated from men and women and were barred from ordination under any circumstances.<sup>47</sup> We can say that the women and men are seen as normal in contrast to these people. Thus the gender of women had nothing to do with the attainment of the 'nibbana.' At the same time the question of gender becomes very crucial. Gender does have a crucial role in the qualification of salvation. The intention of bringing this issue here is to construct the notion in a better manner, which has variously been perceived as the misogyny of the Buddhist traditions, on the one hand, and the equality among sexes on the other. These people were completely excluded on the ground of their sex. The Therigāthā contains excerpts that do reflect that a female birth is difficult and regrettable, highlighting the travails and tribulations of a woman like 'sharing home with hostile wives' or 'giving birth in bitter pain' but nowhere do these texts delimit or question women's spirituality. In the Vinaya we see that in spite of the Eight Chief Rules (*Garudhamma*) and the Doctrine of Women's Incapability, apparently women were not deterred from entering the ascetic community or the Sangha. But nowhere the others' were given any option to prove their spirituality.

However, there are very few examples where they are mentioned. Isidasi's story (case number 27 above) shows how difficult it was for the third sex to lead a normal social life and it was termed as a consequence of bad karma. In Ruja's case also, she was born as neither man nor woman in one of her previous births as a fatal consequence of her going after other men's wives (when she was born as a man in a previous birth). The hermaphrodites/*Pandakas* were even disqualified from making donations to begging monks.<sup>48</sup>

There is no doubt that things like temptations, sexual desires, and bad karma resulting in sex-change are present in the texts, but it is also true with the men. Women are not exclusive holders of these titles. This shows that hating women is not the fundamental issue. When the brethren's were supporting their mothers, lord Buddha did not rebuke them but he appreciated them (The Gijjha Jātaka, 164; the Sama Jātaka, 540). But when the brethren are in contact with their wives, Buddha rebuked them. In the Vinaya there are rulings promulgated by the Buddha when a Bhikkhu (monk) reportedly changed into a female and a Bhikkhuni (nun) became a male.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that the Vinaya does not give a value judgment for these two cases. Instead, both are simply reported as a matter of fact, without a distinction between the case of a male changing to female or vice-versa. Therefore, in the earlier Buddhist literature there is no indication that for the Bhikkhu to become a female is the result of bad karma, or that for a Bhikkhuni to change into a male is the result of good karma.<sup>50</sup>

The sense pleasures, especially sexuality, were thus considered extremely dangerous and tempting, for both men and women. They are crucial attractions to the householder's existence, which were thought to entrap one into continued rebirth in Samsara (world). Avoiding them and fighting off attraction to sexuality are constant themes in the literature of early Buddhism.

We also see the problems faced by women, which was recorded in the literature and great respect about the woman's commitment towards her spirituality, which was hard. The story in the Therigāthā about Khema (cited above) shows that it is actually not about avoiding women, but it actually meant the complete control of one's mind.

Women and men are often seen equally in the texts as their experiences and problems are more or less the same.

There is a belief that women lived the life of widows when their husbands left the house. These women were also respected. The example of Buddha's own former wife tells that how women who lived a life of a widow without marrying others were respected by the Buddhists. The story of Phusati's daughter in law, i.e. wife of Vessantara (story no.547) also shows the difficulties a woman faces when their husbands renounced the world. This sympathy for the women recorded in the texts is very crucial in understanding her position in Buddhism.

Also both for the Buddha and Ānanda, the encounter with the women was not rare rather they were the foremost among those who frequently came in contact with women. This attainment of the spiritual quest has not received much importance in the books where the Buddhist texts are seen as anti-feminine. The statement of Buddha that gained more importance is as follows.

Ānanda, one of the foremost disciples of Buddha, once asked him (in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*) as how to conduct with regard to womankind? Lord Buddha replied that do not see them. Then Ānanda asked, "but if we should see them?" Buddha instructed not to talk to them in response. Then Ānanda again asked that if they should speak, what is to be done. The Buddha replied, "Keep wide awake."<sup>51</sup>

Although this statement is taken very seriously to show that the early Buddhists were anti-female, there is no denying of the fact that women's contact with Buddhists is not rare and as the examples I have given earlier, it becomes even more difficult to

acknowledge that Buddha had said such things. And it was even tougher given the example in the Cullavagga<sup>52</sup> to believe that a disciple like Ananda had asked such question.<sup>53</sup>

Ruja's story, mentioned above clearly shows that women were given ample chance to prove their wisdom. Her teachings to her father proves that the Buddhist path to salvation makes no distinction between men and women while the people treated as others were totally excluded and highly disregarded. In the same story, while giving the discourse she says that those who desire to rise persistently from birth to birth, they should avoid another's wife and thus they will follow their own highest good, 'be they born as a woman or a man.'<sup>54</sup>

### **(b) The Understanding of Women of Buddhism and Vice Versa**

In the *Manusmriti*, it is stated that 'one should not sit in a lonely place with one's mother, sister, or daughter, for the senses are powerful, and master even a learned man.'<sup>55</sup> 'Through their passion for man, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, the women become disloyal towards their husbands; however, carefully they may be guarded in this world.'<sup>56</sup> Manu states that women are never to be free under any circumstances. The males in their families must keep her in dependence.<sup>57</sup> A woman should never be an independent person. In childhood, her father protects her, when married, her husband protects her, and her sons protect her when she is old.<sup>58</sup>

A woman, as prescribed in the Manu, is subject to corporeal punishment. He allows the right to beat a wife. He says that a wife, a son, a slave, a pupil, and a younger brother of

the full blood, who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo.<sup>59</sup> Such strict rules and such strong control on the women's independence are missing in the Jātakas and the Vinaya texts. Women, as imaged in the Buddhist texts, enjoy more liberty and possess more wealth and power. As *Manusmriti* is a prescriptive text, we can see the constant effort of men in controlling the women in every sphere. Such psychological attitude of men towards women is also present in Buddhism. Women are shown as posing threat to men but there are many references where men threaten the women. Therefore, Buddha wanted them to be protected. Men often try to seduce or rape women and the nuns.

The above-mentioned cases (in the first section of this paper) describe the image of woman who is a courtesan and an important patron in comparison to the *Bhikkhunis*. The society's attitudes toward the immoral activities done by the prostitutes are seen disdainfully (even by the Buddhists is evident from these texts). The theory of *Karma* propounded by the Buddha also tells us that the social condition of this section has been much disrespected. But the value of this class in Buddhist texts lies in their capacity to donate.

But there is something else that the Buddhists gave to these women. They also admitted them in the order. This is an unusual thing as their entry in the Sangha could have posed danger, as this class was not seen respectfully in the society, and the nuns on the other hand were respected and their image as a chaste person was respected. Therefore the basic nature of women that is being described by the Buddhists is inseparable unless their sexual desire is challenged. A woman who is seen in the society in relation to her sexuality can become unchaste once she enters the order and then any woman can



become unchaste. Therefore, how one will answer this? This contradiction can also be seen in relation to the authoritative nature of the writer who is not willing to challenge the prevailing images of women but gives concessions to women as they are admitted and proclaims that women are equally capable of attaining salvation.

Thus the considerable interest in the spirituality of these women even belonging to this class, tells us of an important challenge which perceives women not merely as the passive victims of an oppressive ideology but also perhaps primarily as the active agents of their own positive construct. Therefore, women became active agents whose power and independence men constantly tried to reduce. The sixth century saw the Buddhist concept on equality and also observed the increasing subordination of women taking place simultaneously.

An assessment of the rules for the conduct of the *Bikkhus* (monks) and the *Bhikkhunis* (nuns) in the Sangha brings out the essential differences between the two. The rule for the nuns (*Bhikkhuni Patimokkha*) contains three hundred and eleven rules. Of these rules, there were one eighty-one rules similar with that of the monks, but there are extra eighty-five rules exclusively for the nuns. But it must be noted that many of these extra rules were formulated to protect the nuns. As is seen in case number twenty-five, discussed above, in which a nun used to forget the Vinaya frequently and lord Buddha helped her even when she blamed her own sexuality for this.<sup>60</sup>

Buddhism had not entirely distanced itself from the then society and its norms and taboos. The SamaJataka (story number 540) said that Sakka, the god told an (married) ascetic who maintained chastity that, 'Sir, I foresee a danger, which threatens you- you must have a son to take care of you: you must follow the way of the world.'<sup>61</sup> These social

pressures and the ideology also influenced the Buddhists. The general antagonism and mistrust of the female ascetics/ nuns have impacted the Buddhist orders too. But the rules can be seen as to be regulated for governing the interactions of the nuns in the social spheres.

According to the Vinaya Pitaka (Cullavagga section), which is a canonical text, the Buddha allegedly accepted women into his monastic order on one condition: that they adopt the so-called Eight Chief Rules called the *Gurudhamma*. These rules specified that nuns may neither censure nor admonish monks and that nuns must take their ordinations, bimonthly confessions, rainy season retreats, and penances in the presence of monks. Buddha's aunt objected to only one of the eight rules- the one specifying that even a senior nun who has been ordained one hundred years must bow down to a youthful novice who has been ordained but a day- but her objection was overruled by the Buddha himself. While scholars have suggested that the Buddha may never have spoken these baneful rules, their legacy is undeniable.<sup>62</sup> The cumulative effect of the eight Chief rules was to give monks the pastoral rights to discipline and punish nuns. Despite Buddha's reluctance, women did succeed in entering the order making themselves an exclusive, individual epistemic space of their own, which is clearly reflected in their biographical compositions of the early Buddhist nuns, the Therigaṭha. Thus in conclusion it can be said that there are instances in these three texts that the male inadequacies and shortcomings prevalent in the society at that time gave woman a chance to emancipate herself. It is true with the dominant and the dominated group in any society.<sup>63</sup> The subordinated class especially the women not always share the views prevailing in the society by the men who held the dominant position in terms of their

authority over the texts in which women are presented in their own parameters. The roles ascribed to both in the Brahmanical texts and women may not always accept the Buddhist texts. These dissenting voices are not ignored by the Buddhists and therefore we have examples of women (primarily found in the Therigatha) such as Soma, Punna and Punnika<sup>64</sup> who strongly came forward to challenge the norms of the society which gave the women an inferior status. I don't think that the records are incomplete in the sense that those women are frequently depicted as contesting the norm where their sexuality was not a barrier as compared to the third sex.

All women, belonging to any section of the society are depicted as having the capacity to achieve the highest goal, without any exception, and many did. Thus the Buddhist doctrinal position is clear. There were no distinctions between the two sexes. Alan Sponberg has described it as 'Soteriological Inclusiveness,'<sup>65</sup> where being woman or man was not a factor in the ability to attain salvation. The fundamental Buddhist doctrinal position is never questioned in the context of these cases. But the 'other sex' did matter, the point that needs much more investigation.

Therefore in conclusion it can be said that as Buddhism teaches that sensual enjoyments and desire in general, and sexual pleasure in particular, are particular hindrance to enlightenment. The women were not seen as a threat sexually in the popular culture while in the Vinaya they were not prohibited from entering the Sangha and meeting the Buddhist monks and Buddha himself. But it does not mean that the sexuality was not important. While Buddha allowed the ordination of women, he forbade ordination to these 'Other' types of gender.<sup>66</sup>

The Buddha's proscription against the third gender clearly shows that gender does played an decisive role in the attainment of the *nirvana* in Buddhism. Buddhism does not consider women as being inferior of men. Buddhism, while accepting the biological and physical differences between the four genders, does consider men and women to be equally useful to the society while discarding the others'.

Depending on which source one chooses to cite, a woman's place in Buddhism can either seem rather equal to men's or rather backset. Like most subjective issues, it sort of depends on one's paradigm and the opinion of those one listens to. The Pāli canon, opines Kathryn R Blackstone<sup>67</sup> is filled with passages and incidents in support of the Buddhist misogyny. However the portrayal of this general misogynist view of Buddhism becomes problematic in all the three sources. Contrary to general opinion that the Jātakas are always negative and distrustful in their portrayal of women, there are both positive and negative references to be found. In the *Therīgāthā* too we find the same contradiction, as women themselves are writing it.

Thus it can be said that Buddhism has come a long way in the equality of women as compare to men. Buddha taught that anyone, regardless of sex or social position, could achieve enlightenment and the freedom from the cycle of reincarnation yet he disallowed the 'other' shows that being born women was not a problem in Buddhism. The discrimination of women in Buddhism have its roots in Vedic society and are symptomatic of the patriarchal structure of human society since that time. However, Gender inequality can find no justification in core Buddhist teaching and is a blatant contradiction of that teaching. Although the Buddha did take some steps to address the issue of gender inequality, these were unavoidably restricted by the extreme cultural

mind-set of his time, which is best demonstrated in the case of the third sex in the Buddhist literature.

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Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> According to Diana Y. Paul, the traditional view of women in Early Buddhism is that they are inferior. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Traditions*. University of California Press. 1985

<sup>2</sup> Susan Murchutt points out that, "The nun's Sangha was a radical experiment for its time". *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigāthā*. Parallax Press 1991. P.4

<sup>3</sup> Instances of Male turn into female sex change in the early narratives of Buddhism provide corroborative evidence for the agency of casuality, i.e the *Karma*. For example the story of Soreyya. Soreyya was a merchant who falls in love with the elder named Mahakaccāna after having seen him in the bath. Soreyya's wish to marry the elder results in the instant transformation of his sex from male to female. She is then married off (to someone else) and bears children. She was eventually reversed into a male after having asked forgiveness from elder Mahakaccāna. This story is recounted in H. C Norman Ed. *Dhammapada Commentary (Dhammapada-attakathā)*. London: Pali Text Society. 1970. Vol.1.I, pp. 325-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ubhatavyanjanaka* are defined as 'having the characteristics of both sexes'. For details see, T W Rhys Davids and William Stede (eds.), *The Pali-English Dictionary*, The Pali Text Society, Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> The *paṇḍaka* is a complex category that is variously defined in the early Buddhist texts. In the Vinaya Pitaka which is the earliest text mentioning the name, the word seems to refer to socially stigmatized class of promiscuous, passive, probably transvestite homosexuals.

<sup>6</sup> The story of the prohibitions of the ordination of these two classes is in the response to the example of a monk with the an insatiable desire to be sexually penetrated by men, who requested and received this from some animal handlers who then in turn related the incident to the wider community and brought disgrace upon the Sangha (Buddhist monastery). see I B Horner tran. *Vinaya* Vol.4, pp. 141-14

<sup>7</sup> The Mahavagga 1.69, p.223, Vol. 13, Part.1, in T. W Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (trans.), 'Vinaya Texts' (in 3 Volumes, 13, 17, 20), *The Sacred Books of East* (SBE hereafter). Reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> *Vinaya* vol.4. pp. 141-142

<sup>9</sup> Garima Kaushik, *Women and Monastic Buddhism in Early South Asia: Rediscovering the Invisible Believers*. Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Rhys Davids, *Cullavagga, Sacred Books of the East*. Vol.XX.p.323

<sup>11</sup> The five precepts constitute the basic code of ethics taken by the laity (both men and women) of Buddhism. In many *Suttas* regarding lay practices, the Buddha explicitly demands five vows or precepts, which are otherwise dangers and

enemies in the pursuit of salvation. For example, *Book of the Gradual Saying (AnguttaraNikaya)* Vol.3 (Tras).E M Hare.Luzac and Co. Ltd, London, 1934.P. 203.

<sup>12</sup> All references to the Jātakas are from E.B Cowell (ed.) *The Jātakas or the stories of the Buddha's former births* in Six Volumes, MunshiramManoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Jātakas, Vol. 4. P. 199

<sup>14</sup> Rhys Davids, *Psalm of the Early Buddhists. I-Psalms of the Sisters*.Luzac and Company Limited. London. 1964.

Verse 214-216, pp. 108-109

<sup>15</sup> *Jātakas*, Vol.6. P.249

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Vol.5. P. 60

<sup>17</sup> Jātakas, Vol.5. p. 62

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.Vol.4 p. 198

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Vol.6 p.43

<sup>20</sup> ibid. p.40

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Vol.5 p. 52

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> I B Horner (translator), *Book of the Discipline*, Volume. IV, (*Mahavagga*) 78.1.,Pali Text Society, Lancaster. 1951-52. p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Jātakas Vol. 4. P. 179

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Jātakas*, Vol. 6. P. 263

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Vol. 3. P. 62

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kahapanas is the name of ancient Indian coins. These coins was either made of gold, silver or copper. It was also called as 'Punch Marked Coin'.

<sup>30</sup> Mahavagga, VIII, 1.2. in *Vinaya Texts* (Sacred Book of East). Vol. 17. Part.11. Pp. 171-172

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 172

<sup>32</sup> *Jātakas*, Vol.6. p. 120

<sup>33</sup> *Psalm of the Early Buddhists*, (cited above). pp. 156-57

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p. 162

<sup>35</sup> Mahavagga, 1:61 Part 1, Vol.13 SBEpp. 115-16. Translation adapted from Leonard Zwilling, 'Homosexuality as seen in Indian Buddhist texts' in JoséIganacioCabezón (ed.) *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*. State University of New York. Albany. 1992. Pp. 207-208

<sup>36</sup> Jātakas Vol.2. p. 18

<sup>37</sup> *Psalm of the Early Buddhists I*, Pp. 84-85

<sup>38</sup> Ibid Pp. 82-83

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. P. 20

<sup>40</sup> Ibid Pp. 25-26

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. I 20

<sup>42</sup> Mahavagga VIII, 15, 10. Part II. Vol. 17. SBE pp. 222-23

<sup>43</sup> Cullavagga, X, 8.1. Part 111, Vol.20. SBE p. 334

<sup>44</sup> Mahavagga, 1.67. Part 1. Vol.13. SBE. p. 221

<sup>45</sup> Cullavagga, X. 1.6 Vol. 20. Part 111. SBE P.325

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Mahavagga 1.69 Part II, Vol.17 SBE: the Buddha here states, 'if Bikkhus confers the ordination on hermaphrodite were blame as committing sin/*dukkata* offence'. pp.222-223

<sup>48</sup> I B Horner, *Book of the Disciplines*, Mahavagga, Vol. 4. Op.cit., P. 87.

<sup>49</sup> Vinaya III 35, 12, 18

<sup>50</sup> Burkhard, Scherer speaks of a 'basically non-judgmental reaction of the Buddha,' noting, 'this initial pragmatic approach towards gender-crossing is later modified in the authoritative commentary...to the Vinaya' where in the words of Scherer, 'the commentarial stance is evidence for an underlying assumption on gender inequality'. 'Gender Transformed and Meta-Gendered Enlightenment: Reading Buddhist Narratives as Paradigms of Inclusiveness'. *Revista de Estudos da Religiao*, 3 (2006) p. 67, 69

<sup>51</sup> T. W Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Suttas*, SBE, Vol. 11. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1968. Chapter 5.

<sup>52</sup> In the Vinaya it was Ananda who insisted Buddha to let women enter the Sangha. Cullavagga X. p. 354

<sup>53</sup> This issue was raised by B R Ambedkar. The rise and fall of the Hindu women (who was responsible for it?) in D C Ahira edited *A Panorama of Indian Buddhism*. Delhi- Sri Satguru Publications Series Number 161. 1995. Pp. 149-172

<sup>54</sup> *Mahānārāḍakassapa Jātaka*, story number. 544

<sup>55</sup> G. Buhler (trans. & Ed.) *The Manusmriti: The Laws of Manu*, Sacred Books of East Vol. XXV, Oxford, Clarendon, 1886. II. 215.p. 69

<sup>56</sup> Ibid IX,15.P.330

<sup>57</sup> Ibid IX.2.pp. 327-28

<sup>58</sup> Ibid IX.3.p.328

<sup>59</sup> Ibid VIII, 299 p. 306

<sup>60</sup> Cullavagga X 8.1 Part III, Vol. 20. SBE p. 334

<sup>61</sup> Jātakas Vol.6. p. 41

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. P.354

<sup>63</sup> Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. Delhi: Manohar, 2008, pp. 13-15

<sup>64</sup> *Psalm of early Buddhists*, pp. 44-45

<sup>65</sup> A., Sponberg, 'Attitude towards women and the feminine in Early Buddhism', in Jose I. Cabezon (ed.) *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, SUNY Press, 1992, Pp. 3-36.

<sup>66</sup> Mahavagga, 1: 61, 66, 69

<sup>67</sup> Kathryn R Blackstone, *Looking Inwards: Attitude towards the Body; Women in the footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for liberation in the Therigāthā*. Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi 2000.p.61.